For Ethan Petersen, it’s just another day in physical education class at Picotte Elementary School in Omaha. Just like his classmates, he scatters when those who are “it” get near him, inevitably gets tagged and eventually manages to tag someone else.

But 7-year-old Ethan isn’t just like his classmates. One of triplets, Ethan, and his sisters Emma and Katelyn, were born 14 weeks early and spent three months in the neonatal intensive care unit. When Ethan was just 6 weeks old, the neonatologist diagnosed him with periventricular leukomalacia, or lesions on the brain, which indicated he would have motor problems, most likely cerebral palsy.

Despite multiple surgeries to fix his unsteady gait and several Botox injections in his hamstrings to help him stand up straighter, nothing has slowed him down.
Ethan keeps up with his classmates thanks to the efforts of his physical and occupational therapists, Jenny Kronberg-Haire and Kristin Didier.

Employed by UNMC’s Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI) Kronberg-Haire and Didier spend their days in Omaha Public Schools (OPS) where they observe, evaluate and recommend adaptations for a caseload of about 70 students with special needs.

MMI has provided PT/OT services for OPS since 1999 and this year began providing PT services for Bellevue Public Schools. MMI will provide OT services to Bellevue Public Schools next year.

“It’s a valuable service for our students and their families to be able to receive direct therapy in the schools as part of our contract with MMI,” said Julia Allen, director of special education for OPS. “Without MMI, it would be challenging for us to recruit the number of therapists we need as we have 668 students who receive physical therapy and 976 students who receive occupational therapy this school year.”

Like Ethan, some students receive both services. Kronberg-Haire, Ethan’s physical therapist, evaluates his basic motor skills, such as walking form and posture. She ensures Ethan is physically able to get where he needs to go, whether it be with the help of his walker or using handicapped accessible ramps, and limits barriers that prevent him from participating with his peers once he gets there.

Didier, Ethan’s occupational therapist, focuses on fine motor and self-help skills as well as visual and sensory processing abilities. She works with teachers to modify the classroom and adapt learning materials to facilitate successful participation. Outside the classroom, Didier makes recommendations so that Ethan can complete tasks, such as putting on his coat, using the restroom and eating lunch more independently.

“Every kid, regardless of disability, wants to have fun, make friends and do the things other kids are doing,” Kronberg-Haire said. “We try to figure out what we can do in collaboration with the school system to support children in those goals.”

“We want kids to feel as successful as possible and give them the confidence that they can do anything their peers can do,” Didier said. “Our job is to teach them they can do it, show them different ways they can do it and help train and educate teachers and families on how to adapt their classrooms and homes so children can be successful.”

An adapted desk and chair, pencil grips, a clipboard that holds his homework while he writes and a sticky pad that keeps the clipboard from sliding off his desk have resulted in vast improvements in Ethan’s handwriting. Ethan uses assistive technology including a keyboard device with enlarged letter stickers when writing demands become too much. And a basket attached to the back of his walker with shower curtain rings has given Ethan more energy for playing instead of lugging around his coat and helmet.

Ethan’s increase in strength has improved his posture and allowed him to accomplish his goal of kicking a soccer ball.

“He’s amazed everybody by participating in activities that all the other kids are doing,” Didier said.

And that’s all he ever wanted.